

Coins make the grade by subtle degrees

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers more questions from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—At a recent coin show a dealer was asking \$400 for a 1904-O silver dollar marked "MS-65" and just \$24 for another such coin marked "MS-60." What do those terms mean and why is the "MS-65" so much more expensive? Both coins looked fine to me.

R. P., Orland Park

A—Hobby pros grade uncirculated coins on an 11-point scale ranging from MS-60 ("mint state—typical") to MS-70 ("mint state—perfect"). An MS-60 coin must show no trace of wear but often is marred by tiny blemishes called "bag marks" and other imperfections. An MS-70 must be free of even the slightest flaw.

Collectors normally will pay fancy prices for pristine keepsakes because so few coins merit the MS-70 classification or even MS-65 (mint state—choice). An MS-65 usually retails from 4 to 20 times more than the same coin in MS-60.

Q—Is there any way to be certain an old U.S. gold piece is genuine gold without ruining the coin?

A. G., Mundelein

A—Send the item to the American Numismatic Association Certification Service—or its equivalent—where experts would test the coin's specific gravity, among other things. You'd get a certificate of authenticity if your rarity is judged genuine.

Q—In the 1970s we paid \$12.50 each for 100 Franklin Mint medals commemorating the history of flight. How much is

our investment worth today?

E. P., Chicago

A—Each item in your set contains 1.25 ounces of silver, worth about \$8 to a precious-metal dealer. The supply of privately issued medals from the 1960s and 1970s greatly exceeds demand from collectors. Most such collectibles sell for their metal value only.

Q—Do Lincoln pennies from 1943 have any value?

J. J., Evanston

A—Uncle Sam made Lincoln cents out of zinc-plated steel in 1943 to conserve copper for the war effort. "Fine condition" specimens usually retail for about 15 cents each.

● At least 20 dealers will do business next Sunday at the annual show of the Schaumburg Numismatic Society. Hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Itasca Holiday Inn, 860 W. Irving Park Road in Itasca. Coins, paper money and baseball cards will be on sale; admission is free.